

Syagrius

“King of Soissons” (c. 430 - 486)



BRIEFING

Syagrius (c. 430 – 486 or 487 or 493–4) was a Roman general and the last ruler of a Western Roman rump state in northern Gaul, now called the Kingdom of Soissons. Gregory of Tours referred to him as King of the Romans. Syagrius's defeat by King of the Franks Clovis I is considered the end of Western Roman rule outside of Italy. He inherited his position from his father, Aegidius, the last Roman *magister militum per Gallias*. Syagrius preserved his father's territory between the Somme and the Loire around Soissons after the collapse of central rule in the Western Empire, a domain Gregory of Tours called the "Kingdom" of Soissons. Syagrius governed this Gallo-Roman enclave from the death of his father in 464 until 486, when he was defeated in battle by Clovis I.

Historians have mistrusted the title "Rex Romanorum" that Gregory of Tours gave him, at least as early as Godefroid Kurth, who dismissed it as a gross error in 1893. The common consensus has been to follow Kurth, based on the historical truism that Romans hated kingship from the days of the expulsion of Tarquin the Proud; for example, Syagrius's article in the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* omits this title, preferring to refer to him as a "Roman ruler (in North Gaul)". However, Steven Fanning has assembled a number of examples of *rex* being used in a neutral, if not favorable, context, and argues that "the phrase *Romanorum rex* is not peculiar to Gregory of Tours or to Frankish sources", and that Gregory's usage may indeed show "that they were, or were seen to be, claiming to be Roman emperors."

END OF ROMAN GAUL

Despite being isolated from the surviving portions of the Roman Empire, Syagrius managed to maintain a degree of Roman authority in northern Gaul for twenty years, and his state outlived the end of the Western Empire itself, the last Emperors being overthrown or killed in 476 and 480. Syagrius managed to hold off the neighboring Salian Franks, who were internally divided under kings including Childeric. However, it is known that Childeric had previously come to the aid of the Gallo-Romans, joining a certain officer named Paul in operations against Saxons who at one point seized Angers.

Upon Childeric's death in 481 his son Clovis succeeded him. While Childeric had seen no need to overthrow the last Roman foothold in the west, Clovis assembled an army, issued a challenge, and met Syagrius's forces. Few details are known of the subsequent clash, the Battle of Soissons, but Syagrius was decisively defeated and fled. His domain passed to the Franks.

THE BATTLE OF SOISSONS

The **Battle of Soissons** was fought in 486 between Frankish forces under Clovis I and the Gallo-Roman domain of Soissons under Syagrius. The battle was a victory for the Franks, and led to the conquest of the Roman rump state of Soissons, a milestone for the Franks in their attempt to establish themselves as a major regional power.

In the final collapse of the Western Roman Empire between 476 and 480, Syagrius was the only remaining representative of Roman rule in the area between the Loire and the Somme. Syagrius was the son of Aegidius, Roman *magister militum per Gallias* from 457 to 461; he preserved his father's rump state, the Domain of Soissons, between the Somme and the Loire, calling himself dux.

The central location of Soissons in northern Gaul and its largely intact infrastructure allowed a level of stability in the years of the Migration Period, but also made the area tempting for their Frankish neighbours to the north-east. The realm of Syagrius was of almost the same size as the Frankish area, though the Franks were divided into small kingdoms, and, on the right bank of the Rhine, little touched by Roman culture.

Nevertheless, Clovis I managed to assemble enough Franks to confront Syagrius's forces. Clovis issued a challenge to Syagrius naming the time and place of the battle. Gregory of Tours mentions that one Chararic had brought his forces to the battlefield but then stood aloof, hoping to ally with the winner.

The ensuing battle was a decisive victory for Clovis and his Franks. Syagrius fled to the Visigoths (under Alaric II), but Clovis threatened war and the Visigoths handed Syagrius over for execution.

Consequently, the realm of the Franks almost doubled in size; its border was now on the Loire adjacent to the realm of the Visigoths, who were finally routed at the Battle of Vouillé in 507 and forced to retreat south of the Pyrenées.

In due course Clovis marched against Chararic, captured him and his sons, and forced them to accept ordination and tonsures as deacons. On report of their hope to regain power, he had them executed.

DEATH AND AFTERMATH

Around this time war had broken out Aegidius' lands and the Visigoths, over borders, and Aegidius was said by Priscus to have distinguished himself in the fighting. It is known that during this time, Ricimer ceded Lyons to the Burgundians, and Narbonne and most of Narbonensis Prima to the Visigoths, in exchange for alliances. Ricimer probably appointed a replacement for Aegidius, despite the fact that Aegidius retained most or all of his Gallic forces. The two people most likely to have been given the title of *magister militum per Gallias* (master of soldiers in Gaul) were the Roman general Agrippinus, whom Aegidius had previously accused of treason, or the Burgundian King Gundioc, who was Ricimer's brother-in-law. Around this time Aegidius sent embassies to the Vandal king Gaiseric, probably in an effort to form an alliance to oppose Ricimer.

According to a story known to Gregory of Tours and the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, the Frankish King Childeric I, who controlled much of northern Gaul, was exiled at some point after 457, and the Franks then elected Aegidius to rule them. The ancient sources go on to say that Aegidius ruled them for eight years before Childeric was recalled and reinstated as king. This story is considered fictional by most modern historians. Another narrative given by primary sources is that Childeric formed an alliance with Aegidius, although this has slim historical evidence, and is directly opposed by archeological evidence, which supports the theory of the Kingdom of Soissons, the historiographic name given to territory ruled by Aegidius and his son Syagrius, containing the expansion of the Franks. Ernst Stein suggests that the Franks may have placed themselves under Roman rule in the absence of Childeric. Michael Kulikowski posits that his *comitatenses* (armies) were so heavily Frankish at this point, that he could fairly be remembered as a king, rather than general.

Aegidius repulsed an invasion by the Visigoths in 463, routing them at the Battle of Orleans. In this battle, Aegidius' forces killed the Visigoth general Frederic, who was the brother of Theodoric. Some sources say that Aegidius' forces were bolstered by Frankish forces. Aegidius also won a minor engagement against the Visigoths near Chinon, at an unknown date. Despite these victories, he did not take the offensive against the Visigothic position in Aquitaine, possibly due to lack of resources, or due to threats from *comes* (count) Paulus, Gundioc, and the Western Roman generals Arbogast and Agrippinus. He sent a diplomatic party to the Visigoths in May 464, which would not return until September of that year.

DEATH

As Edward Gibbon later wrote, "It would be ungenerous, without some more accurate knowledge of his strength and resources, to condemn the rapid flight of Syagrius, who escaped after the loss of a battle to the distant court of Toulouse." [7] Toulouse was the capital of Alaric II, king of the Visigoths. Intimidated by the victorious Franks, the Visigoths imprisoned Syagrius, then surrendered him to Clovis. He died not long after, stabbed in secret according to Gregory of Tours. [8]

Despite the assassination of Syagrius, the family evidently prospered under Frankish rule. King Guntram sent a Count Syagrius on a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine Empire in 585. A member of the family, Syagria, made a large donation of land to the monks of Novalles Abbey in 739. "The last known member of the Syagrii was an abbot of Nantua who was mentioned in 757." [9]